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ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult problems facing department chairs is inspiring a shared vision of the department, especially among part-time faculty. A departmental forum, or central means of communication that is regularly updated and widely accessible, can be useful in fostering teamwork and this shared vision, while two popular formats for forums are newsletters and World Wide Web pages. In developing a forum, it is essential that basic policy issues be resolved beforehand, including the forum's purpose and audience, what content will be appropriate, the format, methods for ensuring faculty participation, and goals with respect to how ambitious the project will be. In planning a text-based newsletter, key strategies include combining graphics with text to make the publication visually engaging; combining news with feature stories; designing catchy nameplates, mastheads, and headlines; and producing occasional special issues. The Web is a useful tool for providing graphics and text, as well as hypertext links to other resources. To create a Web-based forum, a Web browser, simple text editor, and knowledge of basic hypertext markup language codes are required. A good way to begin designing the site is to browse other Web sites and examine their source code to determine how certain effects are achieved. Care should be taken not to make the site too large to be handled by the department server or too rich in graphics to be downloaded rapidly. Contains 10 references. (BCY)

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TEAM-BUILDING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY:

USING A NEWSLETTER OR A WEB SITE TO ENERGIZE YOUR DEPARTMENT

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Steve Boettcher is presently serving as the Evening Chair and Summer Coordinator of the Mathematics Department at Scottsdale Community College. He is also a full-time professor of mathematics and computer science, and the web master for the Math Department web site. Steve received his Master's degree in Applied Mathematics from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has also done graduate study at Arizona State University in statistics, industrial engineering, and education. In 1994, Steve served as an examiner for the Arizona Governor's Quality Award, an effort to promote continuous improvement in the public and private sectors. He is currently involved with Motorola's Ambassador Program, which aims to enhance the employability of students by integrating business requirements into the math/science classroom.

Introduction

Maintaining *level of interest* and *focus on goals* is a challenge in many college departments. Arguably, the most difficult problem facing a department chair is to inspire a shared vision of what the department should look like in the future[1]. The feeling of being disconnected from one's colleagues and from the departmental mission is particularly acute among part-time instructors. As has been noted, "It is very important to integrate adjuncts into the department and culture of the college to assure a quality learning experience for the students."[2]

Solving this problem requires faculty teamwork. As Daniel Phelan pointed out, "The implementation of a team yields a synergy not otherwise achievable through individuals acting independently."[3] But how is it possible to inspire collective teamwork among a large department of highly mobile faculty?

A departmental **forum** can foster the necessary shared vision and teamwork. By a "forum" we mean a *central means of communication* that is *well constructed, regularly updated*, and *widely accessible*. Such a forum can weld the members of a department into a tighter unit, and concentrate the energy and participation of all groups involved in the educational project.

We have played leading roles with two varieties of departmental forum— a newsletter and a World Wide Web site— and have witnessed their impact. With a bit of hard work, these forums have taken on a life of their own, repaying our efforts many times over. In the pages of *The Right Angle*, a monthly newsletter edited by one of us, there are informative items written by many full- and part-time faculty, and even students and tutors. The newsletter has drawn rave reviews. A knot theorist from Columbia University, who was profiled one March in conjunction with Women's History Month, got hold of the article during her sabbatical in Israel and wrote back: "What a caring department you have, and the effort you put into your work! With more departments like yours people would no longer be able to say that American students are not interested in mathematics. The newsletter is just great!"

A forum can also help energize colleagues in other disciplines. One of us, soon after setting up a web site last August, gave a twenty-minute campus presentation on "Creating Your Own Web Page". With the aid of a computer projection device, faculty in attendance from the Mathematics and Science Division of Scottsdale Community College previewed the new site. At the end of the talk they broke into applause, and the presentation helped solidify plans by a chemist, a physicist, and a biologist to set up their own departmental web sites.

A Six-Step Planning Process

Both newsletters and web sites rely heavily on computer technology, but it turns out that the key concerns are not the *technical* but the *policy* questions: purpose, audience, participation, etc. Such questions are addressed in a **planning process** that should begin well before the forum is established, and should be renewed continually after it is underway.

We have formulated six decision steps in the planning process:

1. Purpose

Begin with the question, What specific problems are we trying to solve by setting up a forum? Your objective, for instance, might be to exchange ideas about teaching and learning, or to provide detailed information about courses and other educational resources.

2. Audience

Given your objectives, what audience should you target? Your forum can potentially involve not only students and colleagues, but also faculty in related disciplines, administrators, people at other schools or, in the case of a web site, unknown persons around the world. Identify and prioritize these groups.

3. Content

Determine what types of information and activity suit your audience. Ask yourself, What do they want to know? What types of information would we like to share with them? Is this information available elsewhere more easily, or is it something extra that is valuable? For example, to foster faculty exchange of ideas about teaching and learning, you might include teaching tips, reports from conferences, and discussion or debate about current problems within your department or discipline. If your goal is to provide students with information about courses and other resources, you might decide to include discussion of new or improved courses, of computer facilities, faculty biographies, tutoring and other support services, and awards and scholarships— rather than simply duplicating the college catalog.

4. Technique

Select procedures and technologies appropriate to the type of forum you envision. Suppose you decide to publish a newsletter: you will need to work out details about news gathering, writing style, word processing, graphics, layout, photoduplication or printing, and circulation. If you decide to set up a web site, you will need to grapple with such issues as what hardware and software to use, how to make your web pages easy to navigate and engaging, and whether and how to provide color, animation, sound, and/or restricted access. Some of these details are discussed below, and we point you to further resources.

5. Participation

A forum isn't really a forum if it is a passive and one-way affair. If everything comes from the editor or the web master, while your colleagues simply read and go on to the next page, then you won't get the synergy and collective energy that you aimed for. Instead, develop procedures, teams and technologies to ensure two-way and many-way participation. Learn to solicit help, ideas, letters, articles, teaching tips or notes from students, faculty and others. Launch debates, or pose challenging problems and ideas for student projects. Even a casual reader or web site visitor can be "funneled" to a point of contact and make a contribution.

6. Ambition

Aim for the right level of ambition. If your goals are too modest, you won't be able to elicit the kind of strenuous teamwork that kindles interest and enthusiasm within your department. Start your forum modestly, but never underestimate the multiplicative effect (synergy) of a collective effort, including its ability to turn negative inertia into positive momentum. On the other hand, you will need to sense the point beyond which additional effort yields diminishing returns.

Never view your forum as an end in itself. It is a means to promote shared vision and teamwork. If it is anything like ours, it will do so in two different ways. There is the collective effort involved in publishing and in maintaining lines of communication, as when different colleagues write or contribute in various ways. More broadly, there are those who will take action based on the ideas presented in your forum, as when faculty or students decide to try a new method of teaching or learning, or to develop or enroll in a new course.

The Nuts and Bolts of Publishing

Few people will read or write for a newsletter that is uninspired. The role of pictures in catching the eye makes it important to combine **graphics** with **text**. Word processors and optical scanners make it easier to embed digitized graphics in your documents, although you may occasionally find yourself resorting to the lower-tech method of scissors and glue.

Another key method to increase reader interest is to combine **news** with **features**. If your newsletter is one-sidedly filled with straight news reports about textbook adoptions, placement test statistics, new hires and the like, then it will be as dull as a stack of department memos. Your publication needs to be topical but also "colorful", so include some feature stories such as profiles of interesting students, position statements on controversial issues, or commemorations of red-letter dates. These can be written in a journalistic style.

Other important elements of your newsletter are a **nameplate** (a banner containing the name, subtitle, logo, date, and issue number), a **masthead** (a box giving the name and whereabouts of the editor and the host department), catchy **headlines** using active verbs, and an **events calendar**. Such elements are discussed in a useful paperback by Mark Beach.[4]

From time to time, a **special issue** suddenly takes shape in the mind of every newsletter editor. Go with it. There have been issues of *The Right Angle* devoted to learning disabilities, calculus reform, collaborative learning, distance learning, National Mathematics Awareness Week, and the 50th anniversary of electronic computers.

Naturally, you will distribute your newsletter to instructors and administrators. But depending on the content, you might want to ask selected faculty to pass copies out in their classes or at college open houses, neighboring high schools, conferences and other special events. If you set up a web site, your newsletter (and its archives) will be one of the first items you will want to make available.

What is the World Wide Web?

Once a network of U.S. military computers, the **Internet** has grown to encompass millions of governmental, commercial, academic, nonprofit and personal users across the globe. The **World Wide Web** (WWW, or simply "web") is a large and dynamic portion of the Internet. On the web, it is easy to offer modest quantities of **multimedia data** (text and audiovisual information), and for others to **browse**, or quickly scan, millions of such offerings to see what is available and to access the information. (The web is not well adapted for transferring a huge quantity of data, where other Internet protocols such as Gopher and FTP are better suited.)

The basic structure of the web can be thought of in terms of servers, sites, and pages. A file **server** is one of the millions of interconnected computers used to hold multimedia data for access by others in the web. Each server contains one or more "storefronts" or **sites**, one for each corporation, agency, or individual using that server to store their data. Each site in turn consists of one or more **pages**, which is a quantity of visual data taking up roughly one computer screen.

Just as traveling to any storefront requires knowing its unique address, so too accessing the data on any web site requires knowing its unique address or **uniform resource locator** (URL). One of the defining characteristics of the World Wide Web is that key phrases on the screen can be highlighted as **hypertext links**, which means that if a user wants more information about them, he or she can click on them with a computer mouse, and

a URL will be used to automatically "transfer" them to the corresponding web site— even if it is halfway around the globe. The users of the web are thereby linked together in an unusually rich way. In order for this and other features of a web site to work, the instructions detailing how its data are to be displayed must be written in **hypertext markup language** (HTML).

Creating Your Web Site

If you haven't done so yet, a key step in setting up your own site is to browse the web and to find department sites that are appealing to you and that parallel your needs. You will notice that web pages can become quite elaborate— but often they need to be somewhat elaborate in order to be convenient to use as well as interesting.

To create a web site, you will need:

- a web browser (e.g., Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer[5])
- a simple text editor, which normally comes with your computer system (e.g., NotePad for Windows; TeachText or SimpleText for the Macintosh)
- knowledge of a few basic HTML codes, also called "tags".

If you are a "beginner"— like we all were at the outset— you might feel a bit intimidated by the prospect of learning a whole computer language (HTML) just to get started. If so, the simplest approach is to take someone's page that you like, and edit it to include your own content. If your college has a web site, you can build your own pages by using your colleagues' pages as templates. If not, you can browse other web sites and borrow accordingly.

Whenever you see something nice that you want to emulate on your own site, find out how it was done. If you select View and then Source (or Document Source), you can examine the HTML instructions that created that page. With a bit of practice, you can copy or edit the instructions as desired. *But be careful to respect copyrighted material.*

There are also **page wizards** that automate the writing of web pages, so you can set up a site from scratch knowing little or nothing about HTML. Many of these can automatically translate your own computer documents from WordPerfect, Microsoft Word, or other formats into HTML format. They typically sell for around $100 - $150. Examples include Internet Assistant (Microsoft), WebAuthor (Quarterdeck), PageMill (Adobe), Navigator Gold (Netscape), Home Page (Claris), and Myinternetbusinesspage (Mysoftware).

If you are ambitious and want the slickest sort of web pages, you should eventually learn HTML itself. There are many on-line tutorials about HTML— so many that people speak of a virtual **Site Developer's College**. An excellent tutorial on HTML can be found at the web site of the Maricopa Center for Learning and Instruction (MCLI).[6] A 1995 survey found that just over half of those who have learned HTML mastered the basics in less than 3 hours, and 79.4% did so in less than 6 hours[7].

Because your welcome mat or **home page** is the first page seen by most visitors to your site, you should take special care designing and updating it. The home page plays the sort of role that a flashy book jacket and a well-organized Table of Contents play for a nonfiction bestseller: first it grabs the reader's attention, then it makes it easy for them to find what information they need.

Hypertext links to graphics and other web pages require correct addressing; they do not work if the address is wrong. If a graphic is "missing", that may be because its address is

not in the same directory, on the same machine, or being served by the same server software, as you require. A beginner's remedy is to insert the full URL for external pages and to put all created pages and graphics into one folder/ directory. In time, you may want to learn **relative addressing** if you want to store pages in different folders/ directories. Since you edit web pages locally, it is a good idea to mirror the same directory set-up on your server when you put your pages on-line.

You can create and display a web page on your own computer, but it is not "on-line" until you **post** it to the web by putting it on a server. You will need:

- a file transfer program (e.g. Fetch[8])
- access to an on-campus or commercial web site server[9].

As noted above, it is important to start modestly, and to sense the point of diminishing returns. If your web site is too large for your department to maintain, then the information will grow stale or outdated, and visitors will not return. Also, don't become obsessed with finding the "perfect" graphic. Although there are free graphics on-line, finding good ones takes a long time, and not every visitor will have a fast enough Internet connection to display the graphic rapidly. A web site that is too rich in graphics can turn the "information superhighway" into a gravel road.

To learn more about effective campus web sites, consult the information maintained on-line at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology[10].

References

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3. "Delegation and Other Teambuilding Processes: Transforming Your Department and Programs", *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference for Community & Technical College Chairs, Deans, and Other Organizational Leaders*, 14-17 February 1996, p. 107.
4. *Editing Your Newsletter*, Fourth Edition (Cincinnati OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1995).
5. Respectively, these can be downloaded free from http://www.netscape.com and http://www.microsoft.com/ie. After downloading, a software utility such as Stuffit Expander is needed to uncompress the program in order to run it.
6. The URL is http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu
7. James E. Pitkow and Colleen M. Kehoe, "Emerging Trends in the WWW User Population", *Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery* 39:6 (June 1996), pp. 106-108.
8. Fetch 2.1.2 can be downloaded free from http://www.tucows.com/. See footnote 5.
9. The monthly cost of a web site account on a commercial server varies between twenty and several hundred dollars, depending on type, size, and speed. Get some quotes from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) near you.
10. The URL is http://www.mit.edu:8001/people/cdemello/results.html